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AUTHOR Morton, Sara; And Others
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ABSTRACT

High school academic eligibility rules for interscholastic athletic participation have been imposed by 50 states and the District of Columbia. The purpose of the eligibility rules is to emphasize excellence in academics over athletic performance and to enhance the academic performance of athletes. This policy paper synthesizes current literature, reports on the findings of states that have evaluated the effects of the policies; and clarifies issues which require further study. The document is organized in the following sections: (1) academic eligibility standards and athletic associations; (2) academic eligibility standards and the States; (3) academic eligibility standards and the law; (4) evaluations of extracurricular participation and school performance; (5) effects of high-stakes academic requirements on athletic participation; and (6) alternatives to high stakes. Informants' suggestions formed the basis for policy recommendations such as: tying eligibility rules to academic support programs, extending participation in extracurricular activities, establishing greater flexibility for individual circumstances, and levying stringent standards for participation in interscholastic athletics. (Contains approximately 40 references.) (LL)

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For further information regarding this report, contact:

Tanya M. Suarez, Director
North Carolina Educational Policy Research Center
105A Peabody Hall, CB #3500
School of Education
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3500
(919) 962-2655

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Academic Standards for Interscholastic Athletic Participation

Sara Morton
Brad Richardson
Andrea Vizoso

November, 1993

ACADEMIC STANDARDS FOR INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION

Sara Morton
Brad Richardson
Andrea Vizoso
North Carolina Educational Policy Research Center

Executive Summary

This paper explores the effects of eligibility rules tied to academic performance for participation in interscholastic athletic activities. A review of research literature on eligibility rules reveals findings of interest to all educators and policy makers wishing to help students, particularly those at risk for poor school performance, succeed.

Eligibility rules exist in all fifty states and the District of Columbia for the purposes of emphasizing academic performance over athletic performance and providing motivation for academic excellence among high school athletes. State high school athletic associations, voluntary organizations which organize high school athletic competitions and to which most high schools belong, usually set the standards for the state. The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA) developed minimum standards for eligibility with the intention of having all states adopt standards no less than NFSHSA's. Nine states have rules that are less restrictive, fifteen are the same, and twenty-seven are more restrictive.

When the courts in several states have considered questions related to eligibility standards, court rulings have been supportive of the standards. The courts view the standards as a legitimate means of furthering a state's fundamental goal of educational excellence.

Organizations and schools throughout the country have conducted evaluations of extracurricular participation and school performance. The majority of research shows a positive relationship between academic performance, self-esteem, social skills, graduation rates, educational expectations, leadership ability, and student participation in all types of extracurricular activities.

Eligibility policies have been criticized as being unfair and ineffective for some students. Lower socioeconomic and minority students are most likely to be disqualified by a stringent grade point average requirement. The academic standard most likely to achieve the positive effect of enhancing academic performance is also debated.

Alternatives to high stakes standards have been implemented by several states in an attempt to enhance academic performance and mitigate the negative effects for some students. Mandated participation in tutoring sessions, study halls, and extra classes is required for students whose grade point average falls below the acceptable standard. Probationary periods, improved methods of measuring academic performance, additional standards related to behavior, attendance, course difficulty, and effort have been included in eligibility criteria.

Substantial evidence exists as to the significant benefits for students in participating in extracurricular activities. Evidence also suggests that eligibility policies which simply limit participation without providing academic support programs may actually harm the at-risk and more vulnerable students.

To provide motivation for academic excellence among high school athletes and to enhance academic performance while achieving the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities, the following policies for eligibility guidelines are recommended:

1. Academic eligibility policies which emphasize academic excellence should be maintained in conjunction with academic support programs designed to improve academic performance.

2. Given the documented benefits of extracurricular activities to academic performance and employment success after high school, policies tied to eligibility rules should be developed to encourage and extend participation in extracurricular activities, particularly to the at-risk and low performing students.

3. Additional measures of the performance of students are needed in order to establish more equitable and effective policies that determine eligibility to play sports or participate in other extracurricular activities.

4. Policies which allow greater flexibility for individual circumstances in the application of eligibility rules should be developed.

5. Educators and policy makers need to carefully monitor the positive and negative effects of levying stringent standards for participation in interscholastic athletics.

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Academic Standards for Interscholastic Athletic Participation

Introduction

High school academic eligibility rules for interscholastic athletic participation have been imposed by fifty states and the District of Columbia. The purposes of the eligibility rules are to emphasize excellence in academics over athletic performance and to enhance academic performance of athletes. Emphasis on academics over athletics as a stated policy is clear by virtue of the existence of academic eligibility rules. What is not clear is if, how, or to what extent academic performance of athletes is enhanced by such policies. There is also debate about whether some student athletes are actually harmed by the policies. The purpose of this policy paper is to synthesize current literature, report on the findings of states which have evaluated the effects of the policies, and clarify issues which require further study.

Reasons frequently expressed in support of academic eligibility policies are: (a) the threat of removal of athletic participation will motivate students to work harder in the classroom; (b) academic eligibility rules will demonstrate to all students that the school's top priority is academic excellence; (c) such policies will caution against athletic practices and events that demand so much time of a student that the student's academic performance is compromised; (d) policies which emphasize academic performance over athletic success simultaneously encourage the development of vocational skills which are important to future employers; and (e) eligibility policies which fail to insure acceptable academic performance by all athletes will result in poor representation of the school by those athletes who demonstrate unacceptable academic performance (Joekel, 1985; Ruffin, 1986).

Reasons frequently expressed in opposition to academic eligibility policies are: (a) eligibility polices unfairly penalize students who are less able academically by depriving them of participation in something they do well; (b) such policies restrict participation in interscholastic athletics which is an integral and a valuable component of a student's education; (c) participation in athletics is the only thing keeping some students in school; (d) pressure on teachers to maintain the academic eligibility of student athletes may result in a double academic standard for the athlete and the non-athlete; and (e) such policies may hurt talented athletes' chances for college athletic scholarships.

Academic Eligibility Standards and Athletic Associations

State high school athletic associations often determine academic eligibility standards for athletic participation. These associations organize high school athletic competitions in each of the states. Membership in the association is voluntary and open to both public and private high schools. Most high schools choose to be members and agree to follow the association rules and regulations to become eligible to enter statewide and inter-school events. The governance of the associations is by representatives of the participating schools: principals, athletic coaches and teachers. Local schools are permitted to set more stringent requirements for extra-curricular participants.

The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA) views athletic participation as a privilege for students who meet minimum standards of eligibility. The Federa-

tion maintains that (a) athletics is an integral part of the overall secondary school educational program; (b) focus should be on the students' needs rather than any other interest such as publicity or fund-raising; and (c) the purpose of athletics is to provide educational experiences not otherwise provided in the curriculum (NFSHSA, 1990).

In 1979, the Federation developed a model of minimum standards for eligibility. The goal was to have all fifty states adopt a policy with minimum standards no less than those of the model. The Federation's policy includes academic standards as well as requirements for age, enrollment, attendance, maximum participation, amateur awards, transfers, residency, medical examinations, non-school participation, recruiting, parental permission, and assumed names. The academic standard states:

> *A student athlete is required to do passing work in the equivalent of at least 20 periods (four subjects with full credit toward graduation) per week. Failure to earn passing marks in four full credit subjects during a grading period or the equivalent shall render a student athlete ineligible for the following grading periods. The record at the end of the credit grading period shall be final and scholastic deficiencies may not be removed for the purpose of meeting minimum eligibility requirements, but they may be made up during an intervening credit grading period if approved by that school's state association. (NFSHSA, 1990, p.50)*

In 1990, the National Federation of State High School Associations conducted a survey of each state's policy and rated it as less, the same, or more restrictive than the Federation's rule. Nine states were found to have rules that are less restrictive, fifteen were the same, and twenty-seven were more restrictive, including North Carolina's.

Academic Eligibility Standards and the States

In thirty-five states, including North Carolina, the academic eligibility rule is established by the governing board of the state's athletic association. The legislature and the athletic association jointly mandate the eligibility rule in seven states. The eligibility rule is established by an act of the state legislature in four states and determined by individual school districts in four states. In the District of Columbia, the eligibility rule is established by the state school board. In forty-eight states provision exists for local school districts to set a more restrictive policy, but not less restrictive. Texas, New Hampshire, and the District of Columbia have no local option (Vizoso, 1992).

Policies vary between states with the most rigid being the "no pass-no play" policies as the one in Texas, where one "F" in any class results in ineligibility and with more flexible policies such as New York, where students are required to be enrolled in four classes, and Minnesota, where students must be progressing satisfactorily toward graduation. In North Carolina, students are required to pass five courses each semester and attend class 85% of the time.

In North Carolina, as well as in twenty-five other states, the eligibility rule applies only to athletic participation. Twenty-one states apply the same rules for all competitive (inter-school) extra-curricular activities. Two states apply the rules to athletics, music and choral activities, and two states leave the decision to the local district (Vizoso, 1992).

Thirty states, including North Carolina, have specific provision for the eligibility of students with disabilities. In these states, the local Individual Education Planning Committee reviews each case individually and helps to determine eligibility on a case by case basis. Eleven other states report that they have no specific provision for students with disabilities, although the local Individual Education Planning Committee has latitude in determining eligibility. Eight states make no provision for students with disabilities and two states allow the local districts to determine policy (Vizoso, 1992).

Academic Eligibility Standards and the Law

Legal questions have been raised about academic eligibility standards, although traditionally the courts have been very supportive of policies setting minimum academic standards for participation in extracurricular activities. Courts have considered whether these standards interfere with a family's Fourteenth Amendment right of personal choice in family related matters in denying students the option of participation (Kite v. Marshall, 1980). The Texas "no pass, no play" rule reached the State Supreme Court after a Houston district judge ruled that the policy was unconstitutional and another district judge upheld the "no pass, no play" rule. Deciding that the rule's objective was to promote increased performance in the classroom, the Court upheld the legislation stating that the minimum academic standards were "rationally related to the legitimate state interest in providing a quality education to Texas public school students" (Spring Branch v. Stamos, 1985). The Texas legislature enacted an amendment exempting all learning disabled students from the "no-pass, no-play" policy in anticipation of litigation concerning violation of the rights of the disabled. The amendment states that the suspension of a learning disabled student from extracurricular participation will be based upon the student's failure to meet the requirements of his/her individual education plan.

A less restrictive policy requiring students to maintain a "C" average in order to participate in extracurricular activities was reviewed by the West Virginia Supreme Court in 1984. The court decided that imposing the "C" average rule was a "legitimate exercise of the State Board of Education's 'general supervisor' power over the Educational System and in furtherance of the fundamental educational goal of academic excellence" (Bailey v Truly, 1984). The West Virginia policy was the first state policy to make a distinction between academic extracurricular activities (e.g., drama, newspaper) and nonacademic extracurricular activities (e.g., sports), stating that the rule should only apply to students involved in nonacademic activities. Justice Harshbarger of the West Virginia Supreme Court expressed his disagreement with the apparent inequity of the West Virginia rule saying, "My brothers would let a flautist flunk without forfeiting his or her flute. But pity the poor punter who does not pass" (Lufler, 1985).

In 1987, the Montana Supreme Court upheld the 2.0 grade point policy, ruling that participation in activities was not a fundamental right of a student under either the federal or state constitutions. The Court also ruled that the state government's interest "in developing the full educational potential of each person, and in providing a basic system of quality public education by enactment of the 2.0 grade rule, outweighed the students' interest in participating in existing activities" (Sharp, 1989). In Louisiana, the court decided that the rule was rationally related to the promotion of academic excellence in barring a student from trying out for the cheerleading squad (Sharp, 1989).

After reviewing the court cases nationwide, Walter Champion, law professor at Texas Southern University School of Law, maintained that stringent eligibility standards will continue in accordance with legitimate state interest in providing a quality education. He suggested that these standards (a) should apply only to the core courses required for graduation and not electives, (b) should include a review board for hardship cases, and (c) should relax the passing score from 70 to 60 out of 100, where this is the standard (Champion, 1987).

Evaluations of Extracurricular Participation and School Performance

In 1985, Indiana University, along with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASP) and the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFSHSA), conducted a national survey of 7000 high school students and high school principals to assess the value of extracurricular activities programs. The results showed that over 90% of principals surveyed believed that participation in extracurricular activities, including sports, is a valuable educational tool, promotes citizenship, and develops a positive "school spirit." Almost 75% of principals believed that extracurricular activities do not place an excessive demand on a student's time and that the community at large strongly supports the activities program. A majority of the students surveyed said that activities make school more enjoyable and are a "very important part of their high school education" (NFSHSA, 1985).

Most research shows a positive relationship between academic achievement and student participation in all types of extracurricular activities, including sports (Camp, 1990; Holland & Andre, 1987; Laughlin, 1978; Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990; Soltz, 1986; Steinberg, Brown, Cider, Kaczmarek & Lazzaro, 1988). In fact, in *The Case for High School Activities*, the NFSHSA reviewed studies in Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas and North Dakota that showed athletes' GPAs were significantly higher than non-athletes (NFSHSA, 1985). The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) reported in 1986 that students who participated in extracurricular activities academically outperformed students who did not participate (OERI, 1986).

The New Mexico Activities Association conducts periodic evaluations as part of a "continuing effort to monitor the effect of various scholastic regulations, dropout rates and educational perspective with regard to interscholastic participation" (New Mexico, 1990). The evaluations include both athletic and non-athletic activities. An "Interscholastic Activities Participation Fact Sheet" is published with the latest findings of the most recent evaluation. The results of the 1992 evaluation indicated that the GPA of students involved in interscholastic activities was 2.8 as opposed to a GPA of 2.0 for high school students not involved in any activities; less than 3% of youth offenders brought before one particular judge had been involved in high school athletics; 95% of high school principals surveyed believed participation in interscholastic activities promotes citizenship; 95% of drop-outs were not involved in any kind of activity; over 60% of the principals indicated that grade point averages of at-risk students improved by being active in interscholastic activities; only 16% of at-risk students were involved in any kind of interscholastic activity.

Other benefits which appear to result from participation in extracurricular activities, especially athletics, are increased levels of self-esteem (Holland & Andre, 1987), lower levels of delinquency (Holland & Andre, 1987; Landers & Landers, 1978; Laughlin, 1978), higher rates of class attendance (Laughlin, 1978), higher educational goals and aspirations (Ballantine, 1981;

Cutright, 1983; Hanks, 1979; Holland & Andre, 1987; Rehberg & Schafer, 1968; Spady, 1970) and social skill development (Holland & Andre, 1987; Rehberg & Schafer, 1968; Spady, 1970). According to an Institute for Athletics and Education survey reported in Fitness magazine (1993), high school female athletes were "80% less likely to be involved in an unwanted pregnancy, 92% less likely to be involved with drugs, and three times more likely to graduate from high school, than their non-athlete counterparts."

In the book *Student Activities in the Innovative School*, Robbins and Williams (1969) state that...

> *interscholastic sports provide the means of enhancing a person's physical fitness, his [her] capacity to work cooperatively with others, his [her] leadership ability, the development of his [her] character, his [her] ability to evaluate his [her] efforts in the light of their contribution to team accomplishment, as well as his [her] individual satisfaction. In the joy of victory or the tears of defeat these qualities remain with them for life. (p.108)*

For the school year 1984-85, the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools in North Carolina compared the performance of high school student-athletes to non-athletes on a variety of criteria. Their report of non-seniors stated that athletes missed fewer classes than non-athletes (2.6 days to 3.55 days); had a lower percentage below a 2.0 GPA (28.11% to 39.26%); had a higher percentage who took the SAT (14.11% to 9.66%); and had a higher average GPA (2.45 to 2.23). For seniors, the report stated that athletes missed class less often than non-athletes (2.72 days to 4.45 days); had a lower percentage below a 2.0 GPA (26.67% to 34.04%); had a higher percentage who took the SAT (71.62% to 52.88%); and had a higher average GPA (2.44 to 2.29) (North Carolina High School Athletic Association [NCHSAA], 1990).

In a student athlete survey conducted by the Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA), 82% of the student athletes indicated that they participated in sports because they wanted to, as opposed to being "talked into it" by parents, teachers, or coaches. The student athletes were asked in the survey to indicate the effects that they believed should result from athletic participation as well as the effects that they had actually experienced. The top five effects the student athletes believed that should result from athletic participation were also the top five they had experienced: fun, teamwork and cooperation with peers, self-satisfaction in setting and accomplishing goals, self-discipline, and confidence and poise (IHSAA, 1990). In a study of 10,000 students, aged 10 - 18, from school systems in eleven cities and conducted by Ewing and Seefeldt of the Youth Sports Institute of Michigan State University, results indicated that "having fun, improving skills, staying in shape and experiencing competition" were the most important reasons for participating in athletics (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1988).

Further evidence of the value of participation in extracurricular activities comes from a study done by the American College Testing Service. ACT found that the best predictor of success after high school (defined as self-satisfaction and community involvement) was achievement in extracurricular activities — not high grades in high school or college, or high scores on college entrance examinations (Gholson, 1985). A 1987 poll in *USA Today*, showed that of 75 people at the executive vice president level or higher in 75 Fortune 500 companies, 95% had participated in high school athletics ("Most top", 1987).

The Center for the Study of Sport in Society (CSSS) conducted a study aimed at examining the importance of participation in sports to American minority youths using a data base generated by the U.S. Department of Education's *High School and Beyond* study. According to the CSSS, athletic participation has three main effects: social benefits, academic gains, and dropout rate influence. First of all, they found that "compared to non-athletes, athletes were more apt to see themselves as popular and to be more involved with community in extracurricular activities." Secondly, along with having higher GPAs, minority athletes scored higher on math, verbal, and reading achievement tests than their non-athlete counterparts. In explanation, CSSS reports, "sport involvement may have become an academic motivator, a 'carrot in front of the noses' of enthusiastic athletes." Finally, CSSS found that the dropout rate for some minority groups was reduced by involvement in sports, suggesting that people "found sport participation inherently fun and personally satisfying...they stayed in school because they enjoyed the sport and the friendships and popularity it fostered" (Lapchick, 1990).

Effects of High-Stakes Academic Requirements on Athletic Participation

The reasons for the establishment of academic eligibility policies seem straightforward. The establishment of high standards for the highly visible group of students who are athletes: a) suggests an expectation of high academic standards for all students; b) provides a guarantee that co-curricular activities will not interfere with or detract from the academic performance of students; and c) provides motivation for athletes to perform at a higher level than they might otherwise attain.

In 1990, the North Carolina High School Athletic Association conducted a survey with its 333 member schools in part to ascertain the eligibility trends resulting from a policy change. The North Carolina eligibility rule had been changed from requiring students to pass four classes in 1988-89 to five classes in 1989-90. Although the survey had a low return rate (42%, 139 out of 333), the results indicated that in 1989-90, 57% (339 out of 597) of ineligible student-athletes in the fall were able to regain their eligibility in the spring, but another 480 students became ineligible in the spring. Improvement was seen the next year, when 70% (464 out of 664) of ineligible athletes regained their eligibility in the fall, while only 212 became ineligible in the spring. Twenty-five schools reported that a total of 55 student-athletes who were ineligible in the fall of 1990 were so not because they failed to pass the five classes required by the state, but because they failed to meet "local promotional standards" set by local educational agencies (NCHSAA, 1990). Traditionally, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), or school districts, have been given the option to raise the academic requirement set by the state in order to further their drive toward academic excellence.

The North Carolina association leaders felt that they had not lost participants after the policy change. They believed that the more stringent standards demonstrated that education is the first priority among coaches and athletes, and that athletic departments strongly support academic excellence. They stated that many of the initial problems were not long-term problems and that students who did not qualify initially were able to improve their grades during subsequent grading periods. However, association leaders did believe that participation would have dropped if they had adopted a "C" minimum grade or a "C" average as the policy (C. Shannonhouse, personal communication, October , 1991).

However, all of the effects of the eligibility rules are not positive and, for some students, may be detrimental. In one Michigan school district, the "pass play" rule did not produce the intended effect. There was an increase in the incidence of low academic averages within the total school population; the grades of athletes who became ineligible did not improve; and fewer students participated in athletics in subsequent years. Honea concluded that strict eligibility requirements do not work, that the achievement of the eligible, the ineligible, and the non-participant is not enhanced (Honea, 1987).

Eligibility policies have been criticized as being neither fair nor effective for some students. In 1987, the U.S. Department of Education found that while extracurricular activities participants generally perform better in the classroom than the average student, minority and low SES students are the ones who suffer the most from eligibility policies. Black and Hispanic male athletes have been most often disqualified by a 2.0 grade point average requirement. Furthermore, positive correlations between interscholastic athletic participation and academic achievement, high educational expectations, prospects for college attendance, and high rates of retention are stronger for children of low socioeconomic status and/or low cognitive ability. The study concluded "sadly, the students who have the most to gain from sports are the ones being eliminated from these proven activities" (Honea, 1987).

The question of fairness and effectiveness also arises when deciding which academic standard is best. The Texas "no pass, no play" rule, which requires a student to receive a passing grade in every class, has received criticism because, in effect, it allows straight-"D" students to play, while punishing students who have all "A"s and one "F". The "C" average rule is also criticized on the grounds that "C" averages are defined differently among teachers and can be too easily manipulated by changing the difficulty of tests. Tauber argues that teachers who grade on a "curve" are not able to fairly determine where the "C" average begins because a student's grade is determined not only by how well he or she does, but also by how well everyone else does (Tauber, 1986).

Students may purposefully avoid tougher high school courses under the threat of stringent academic eligibility guidelines. A Texas A & M Principals' Poll in 1987 found that 63.2% of middle and high school principals felt that the "no pass, no play" policy of Texas had some influence in driving students from tougher courses. Fifty-seven percent of secondary school principals in Houston said that the rule was very influential or moderately influential in directing students away from difficult classes. According to James McNamara, director of the poll, "although the intent ... was ...to encourage students to concentrate on academics, it has instead become a counterproductive and dysfunctional policy that is leading students to less demanding courses" (Honea, 1987).

Perhaps even more dysfunctional is the trend to transfer athletes into special education programs in states where special education students are exempted from the eligibility rules. Several schools were assessed penalties for this, according to the Texas Education Agency (Vizoso, 1992).

Alternatives to High Stakes

Alternatives to removing a student-athlete's eligibility have been implemented by some states. Many states have reported instituting a probationary period for students who have become ineligible academically. Students are allowed to continue athletic participation while being given a time period in which to improve their grades. Probationary periods often include tutoring and

mandatory study halls. Such policies mandate participation of students who fall below a prescribed academic standard.

Roger Jones, principal of E.C. Glass High School in Lynchburg, Virginia, implemented mandatory study hall for athletes below a 2.0 GPA, using teachers who volunteered to tutor once a week after school. He found that 30% of students in athletic study hall raised their GPAs to 2.0, eleven of whom had never had a 2.0 previously. He also found that 62% of the study hall athletes improved their GPAs from the previous semester (Jones, 1986).

The same effect was seen at Monroe High School in North Carolina where varsity football players receiving less than a 77 in one or more classes were required to attend study hall after school and before practice. Of the fifteen players attending study hall, ten had received a grade below 77 in more than one subject (7 in 2 subjects, 1 in 3 subjects, and 2 in 4 subjects for a total of 25 subjects or class grades). Results showed significant improvement with 25 class grades improving (19 were above 77, 6 still below 77), 1 grade staying the same, and only 4 grades going down. Courses included advanced or college preparatory courses (Dr. John Morris, personal communication, January 1992). Academic performance improved while the students in Glass and Monroe were still participating in sports.

In the District of Columbia, tutorial programs to assist students in maintaining academic eligibility were established when the "C" average policy went into effect. Funds were provided to certain schools for after-school tutorial programs beginning in March 1990. During the play season, attendance was mandatory. After review of the "C" average policy, recommendations to the District Board of Education from the Superintendent's office, Research and Evaluation Branch, included: (a) elimination of the cumulative requirement and the reduction of the grade-point average requirement from the current 2.0; (b) inclusion of equal emphasis on class attendance and behavior with support services provided as needed; (c) implementation of tutoring programs "so that the STUDENT, not just the ATHLETE, is the focus of academic support;" and (d) provision of funding and auditing for required tutorial services (Bland, 1990).

In California, another "no pass, no play" state, a special daily, year-long class was developed for student athletes by The American Sports Institute, a non-profit, educational organization. The program is called PASS (Promoting Achievement in School through Sports). Based on the belief "that the principles and skills that lead to success in athletics are the same as those that lead to success in academics," students receive instruction in concentration, balance, relaxation, power, rhythm, flexibility, attitude, and instinct. They set personal goals and complete projects which they select to include reading, writing, and speaking assignments. The academic performance of athletes in one pilot high school in San Francisco has improved significantly and non-athlete students are requesting permission to participate in the class (Bland, 1990).

These programs may be more effective than punitive policies because, while they encourage and enable academic achievement, they protect the student from the negative consequences of prohibiting athletic participation. Mandatory participation in these academic improvement programs concentrates on the amount of effort a student puts into school achievement as well as focusing on academic performance.

Schools choosing to implement academic support programs instead of automatically removing the eligibility of their student athletes also send students a message that academic achievement is of primary importance. While academic achievement is of primary importance,

however, athletic participation is a valuable learning experience as well. The decision handed down by the court in Kelly v. Metropolitan County Board of Education of Nashville echoes this message, stating that the athletic program is an integral part of a student's total educational experience (Harper, 1986).

Improved methods of measuring academic performance for all students is being debated in many states, including North Carolina. For example, Wyoming is moving towards a "Total Mastery Curriculum", a reform which will alter significantly the grading policy of the schools (Vizoso, 1992). Rather than using Carnegie units to determine eligibility for the high school diploma, students will be evaluated on a wider range of tasks, activities, and projects. Eligibility policies will certainly reflect changes in grading policies.

Some states have adapted the rules to combat the trend of students avoiding tougher high school courses under the threat of stringent eligibility guidelines. For example, New Mexico gives different weights to honors courses (F. Walsh, personal communication, October, 1991). Texas has provisions for local districts to exempt advanced level course grades (Vizoso, 1992).

Discussion

There are three groups of student athletes to whom eligibility policies apply. The first is the group of students who perform well academically with or without eligibility rules. The students in the first group constitute the majority of student athletes. The second group is the group of students most likely to benefit from the eligibility policies. Students in the second group are the students who perform less well academically but are capable of doing acceptable academic work. Periodically, they drift toward unacceptable performance but the academic eligibility policies are there to provide the motivation to maintain acceptable academic standards. The third group are the students who do not perform well academically with or without the eligibility rules.

Since athletes generally perform well in their academic work, increasing standards and establishing high stakes, such as exclusion from participation, should primarily affect only the small percentage of low achieving student athletes who are in the third group. These individuals may be marginal as students and at risk of dropping out. There is significant evidence that a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic male students and lower socioeconomic students are hurt by eligibility policies. These groups are impacted negatively since many will not be able to meet the standard and will be unable to profit from athletic participation. Low achieving students tend to stay out of athletics once they are declared ineligible (Peterman, 1986). Rather than motivating these students to achieve academically, the eligibility rules may simply have the effect of excluding them from one of their only sources of inspiration in school.

For the low achievers, several responses occur, all of which have been exhibited throughout the states. One response is to ignore the students who fail to meet academic eligibility criteria and are, therefore, unable to participate in athletics. Those supporting this response point to the success of the policy in weeding out and punishing those students who do not meet the standards as well as in making an example of those students. The current literature, however, suggests that participation in interscholastic athletics is a valuable part of a student's educational experience, particularly for those students at greatest academic risk. Furthermore, policies making these students ineligible to participate without academic support programs designed to reinstate their eligibility typically have dire academic consequences for these students. A second response

is to lower the eligibility rules to avoid losing talented athletes whose academic performance is unsatisfactory. This tactic circumvents the purpose for which the policy was adopted initially and promotes negative perceptions of the preeminence of athletics over academics in public schools. A third response is to maintain or increase the eligibility rules while providing academic support services which have been successful in increasing academic performance of student athletes.

Increased academic performance that is consistently documented in the literature is usually the result of programs and policies which follow the development of eligibility rules. Students appear to benefit (or not) from the response of the educators to the eligibility rules rather than to the eligibility rules themselves. For example, students apparently benefit from tutorial and academic support programs when policy makers respond to the eligibility rules by making such programs available.

Most of the studies conducted by states have provided valuable information in identifying trends in eligibility; in ascertaining fluctuations in the numbers of eligible and ineligible students; in canvassing students as to the reasonableness of the policies; and in soliciting the observations of administrators, teachers, and coaches as to the effects of the policies. Studies indicate which students maintained, which students lost, and which students regained eligibility, but not why. Other factors or intervening variables which may generate improved academic performance exclusive of eligibility policies are not controlled nor taken into account in these studies. Consequently, a direct effect of eligibility policies on increasing academic performance is not well documented in the literature.

Substantial evidence exists, however, as to the benefits of participation in interscholastic athletics to students. There is evidence that athletes generally perform at a higher level than other students, independently of eligibility policies (Honea, 1987). The Center for the Study of Sport in Society found no evidence that sports participation is a detriment to higher grades (Lapchick, 1990). This contradicts the assumption of many policy-makers that students earn lower grades because they spend time on athletic participation rather than course preparation. Research shows a high correlation between interscholastic athletic participation and such factors as academic achievement, positive self-concept, good conduct, leadership ability, physical fitness, high educational expectations, high rate of retention, greater prospects for college attendance, and later success in life.

Policy Recommendations

1. Academic eligibility policies which emphasize academic excellence should be maintained in conjunction with academic support programs designed to improve academic performance. Rather than the rule being simply "no pass, no play," it becomes "no pass, no participation, no play." Experience with effective academic support programs tied to eligibility rules indicates that the majority of student-athletes required to participate in these programs not only maintain their eligibility but often surpass their prior academic performance. The student-athletes can improve academic performance while benefiting from the additional positive effects of interscholastic athletic participation.

2. Given the documented benefits of extracurricular activities to academic performance and employment success after high school, policies tied to eligibility rules should be developed to encourage and extend participation in extracurricular activities, particularly to the at-risk and low performing students. Participation in school activities for which the student is highly motivated becomes an avenue through which the at-risk student may

become invested in the school. This seems to be a "win-win" situation in which students benefit in a variety of ways through extracurricular participation, one of which can be increased academic performance.

3. Additional measures of the performance of students are needed in order to establish more equitable and effective policies that determine eligibility to play sports or participate in other extracurricular activities. Factors such as behavior in and out of the classroom, school attendance, evidence of serious effort to improve academic performance, and successful participation in advanced or honors courses should be included in eligibility standards. Extending eligibility criteria to include a wider range of factors which are significant to the success or failure of a student also sends a message as does academic criteria that appropriate behavior in and out of school is important.

4. Policies which allow greater flexibility for individual circumstances in the application of eligibility rules should be developed. Current eligibility policies usually establish uniform expectations for students with different abilities and disparate resources. While academic and personal excellence should be the goals for all students, educators can enhance the likelihood of reaching the goals through the development and application of policies which consider the individual conditions and characteristics of the students.

5. Educators and policy makers need to carefully monitor the positive and negative effects of levying stringent standards for participation in interscholastic athletics. Because eligibility policies vary from state to state and because evaluations of the effects of the policies have not been consistent nor widespread, the policy which is most conducive to increasing the academic performance of high school students may vary among students. If negative effects appear, the policy can be adjusted, not to lower the standard necessarily, but to provide more support for students and lower the stakes for those students who may be at greatest risk of school failure without participation in competitive school activities.

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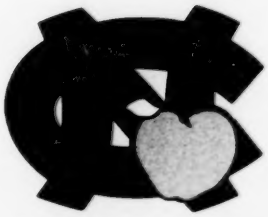
Introducing the Center

The North Carolina Educational Policy Research Center was established in 1991 through a contract to the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from the State Board of Education. The mission of the Center is to strengthen the information base for educational policy decisions in North Carolina to enhance outcomes of schooling for children. The Center seeks to accomplish this mission by:

- conducting policy research and analyses;
- preparing research reports examining broad policy issues, policy briefs providing concise information about specific issues, and quarterly newsletters;
- disseminating research-based information on educational policy issues to North Carolina policymakers, educators and community leaders;
- providing a forum for the discussion of educational policy issues; and,
- training future educational leaders in the conduct and use of policy research.



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